THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

What's Bad About Feeling Good?

November 16, 1997
John M. Buchanan

Think of it – the power to be rests within. To be created in the image of God means that we are in some sense a picture of God. There is that of God in us, there is that of God in the poor and destitute of the world; in them there is something of God. Sin is when that something, that image, is distorted or denied or deprived or twisted. When we deny that image in ourselves and, even worse, deny it in others, that is the point when we have committed the almost unforgivable sin, the point when we demean and demonize others.... If the denial of the image of God is the problem, the affirmation of the image of God in self and in others is the solution.

Peter J. Gomes
The Good Book

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

WHAT'S BAD ABOUT FEELING GOOD?

"you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart... soul... mind... strength.... You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater." Mark 12:30-32

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength – and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

It's actually the love of self that gives us the most trouble. It is the love of self part of this new paradigm which presents the greatest challenge.

Peter Gomes, minister of Harvard's Memorial Church, tells a story about the fragility of self-love in most of us. Gomes was in his office on a Saturday morning and the support staff was off, so he was taking his own phone calls. A woman asked, "Who's preaching this Sunday?" He answered, a little self-consciously, "The preacher is the minister in the Memorial Church and Plummer Professor of Christian Morals." "Oh," the woman said, "is that that short, fat, little black man?" Gomes is an elegant scholar. He reflects that the comment wasn't racist, or even mean. It was accurate. But he is also a man, "not that I think of myself as tall and blond and a dead ringer for Denzel Washington, but I was rebuffed and she had come dangerously close to my self esteem."

Just last Friday night I was given a very nice award by the St. Andrew Society of Illinois. The award itself was a wonderful little statue of a Scotsman in his kilt and full regalia. After this celebrative evening we were on the elevator at the Hilton going back to the parking garage and I was proudly holding my statue in my arms and an elderly woman boarded the elevator. She had in her hands a program, so I knew she was at the banquet. She looked at the statue and she looked at me and she said, "Are you John Buchanan?" And, rather enjoying myself, I said, "Why yes, I am," and she said, "You mean you're the pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church?" And feeling very good because we had out of town guests and they were now seeing what a person I was, I said, "Yes, I am," whereupon she turned away from me and said, "Oh."

One time Jesus was asked a very important question, "Teacher, which commandment is the first of all?" The man who asked this question was a scribe, an important man, devoted to his religion, nation and the general welfare, a man of influence and prestige. Scribes had been asking Jesus a lot of questions recently, most of them hostile. His question is a good one: "Which commandment is first of all?" That is, can you tell me what is central, absolutely essential; can you distill it all – all of it, the entire tradition, history, ritual, ethical structure of our religion?

It was a popular rabbinical device, by the way. Make it simple and short. A disciple of the great first century Rabbi Hillel asked him to summarize the whole law while standing on one foot and he did it by saying,

> "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary."

It's a good question, "Which is the first commandment? What is the essence of our faith?" Because there were, in fact, between six and seven hundred commands – or laws, and thousands of situational rules based on the laws designed for every conceivable human situation. First century Judaism had a lot of rules and how many and how thoroughly you lived in accord with them had a great deal to do with your place in society. Pharisees and scribes obeyed the rules a lot, and publicly. They were greatly admired. The poor

people were too busy trying to figure out where the next meal was coming form to pay much attention to all those rules. They were known as "sinners."

So the question is a critical one: which of all these commandments and rules and regulations is the most important. The answer is important and very interesting.

Actually, it's two answers. Everybody knows the first one: the Shema, from the Book of Deuteronomy. They recited it every time they gathered. They read it in the synagogues. They said it daily. It is the great foundation of all. It is Judaism's great gift to the world – a radical monotheism.

> "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

That's first. That's fundamental. But a second is like it. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." That's a very critical connection. Everybody knew that verse of scripture from the Book of Leviticus, the most detailed and precise collection of rules – hundreds and hundreds of rules: what to do about skin rashes and what food to eat and how to prepare it and all sorts of rules about hygiene and sexual behavior; rules about what the priest is to wear and the size of the candlesticks in the temple, and rules about how to live with your neighbor. Don't defraud him, don't steal his sheep, don't plant grain on his side of the property line, don't curse his deaf son, and in the middle of it all, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

And then, the scribe who asked the original question says something important, something which, when you think about who he is and what he represents, is stunningly important.

> "Teacher, you have spoken truly – to love God and neighbor: this is much more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices."

It's a defining moment in the whole story, I think. Love for God and neighbor here are given precedence over what people from time immemorial have thought they had to do: appease the gods, please the gods, persuade the gods to be merciful, lobby the gods to give good gifts. Religion as lobbying. Jesus said true and right religion is love for God and love for neighbor and the scribe "got it." It's a great moment, a timeless moment.

From the beginning, this love for neighbor, which is now, according to Jesus, the very essence of religion, has not been an abstraction, an emotion, or a feeling. Rather it is very practical. Love your neighbor by treating him/her justly, kindly, fairly. Treat him/her as you treat yourself. That's the connection which is both critical and troublesome.

We've had a lot of trouble with self-love ever since St. Paul suggested that the human self is not altogether to be trusted. "The good I would, I do not. The evil I would not, that is what I do," St. Paul confessed and we all know a little bit about that. Augustine equated sin with selfishness, too much self love, self gratification. Luther said that the self turns in upon itself, and that sin is that not too subtle assumption that I am the center of the universe; my ego, my needs, my desires are what matter most. Someone asked Karl Barth what he thought about love of self and Barth said, "God will never think of blowing on this fire which is bright enough already." And Joan Brown Campbell, head of the National Council of Churches, observed in a speech that her grandchildren help her remember the human condition. The first word each of them learned to speak, she said, was "mine!"

Self love is at least ambiguous. True religion is at least, in part, a redirection of our natural inclination to serve ourselves to a service to and love for something else – God and neighbor. It is learning to live, not for self, but for others. It is learning how to give your life away, rather than to spend your years adorning and saving and improving and celebrating your own little life.

And yet, he did say, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." And I think there is a sense in which we have not understood it or paid enough attention to it. The excesses of the "me generation" – become your own best friend; take care of yourself; do yourself a favor; Stuart Smalley's classic, "I'm smart enough, I'm good enough, and doggone it, people like me!" – all the while smiling adoringly at himself in the mirror, certainly showed the unattractiveness and silliness and sometimes destructiveness of the human ego on a rampage.

But in a very thoughtful essay, Peter Gomes suggests that a lack of self esteem, self confidence, self love, may be more of a problem than we realize.

Gomes says university students – and all of us actually – ask five questions that need answering:

- Am I the only one who is confused?
- What can I trust?
- Am I on my own?
- Can I feel good about myself?
- How can I face the future?

Gomes notes the conventional wisdom that says we have too much ego, arrogance, self-esteem. He says that is not his experience. Rather, Harvard students and all of us engage in a life-long mania he calls "impostor syndrome," an activity designed "not so much to impress others as it is to protect ourselves from the discovery on the part of others that we are not all that we appear to be." We live, he says, in constant fear that we will be found out, exposed.

I loved something Frederick Buechner said once. He is a modest and self-effacing man and the fact that he is much adored, respected and admired by so many people seems to come as a genuine surprise to him. He said that when he is invited to sign his books or lecture at a university or deliver a paper to a learned society, he says he always looks out at his eager audience and thinks, "If they only knew!"

Well, Gomes says the good news is that,

> "We are not worse than we think. We are better than we deserve to be. Why? Because at the bottom of the whole enterprise is the indisputable fact that we are created, made, invented, patented in the image of goodness itself. We are cast from a perfect die and the imprint is on us and it cannot be erased or avoided. God made us, male and female, in the image of goodness and goodness itself is who and what we are and God pronounced it good because as kids in the ghetto say, 'God don't make no junk.''' [*The Good Book,* p. 199]

And so, self worth is a theological issue and it becomes an ethical issue, a moral issue quickly; that about you and me which is ultimately inviolable is God's image in us. "People may take everything from you," Gomes says, "but they can't take away the fact that you are a child of God and bear the impression of God on your soul."

Sin, then, is not only thinking too highly of yourself, but also not highly enough. Sin is trying to deny God's image in yourself or forgetting it in your neighbor.

In our time, racism and anti-Semitism are two ways in which the image of God is denied and violated, not only in its victims but in its perpetrators. "Slavery was only possible in a country where white Christians denied the humanity of the slaves, but also their own humanity in the process," is the way Gomes put that.

I visited the U. S. Holocaust Museum last Thursday along with other members of the Board of the National Council of Churches and again saw and experienced the enormity of the evil which happens when human beings deny the humanity of others and their own as well.

Cornell West in the department of African-American Studies at Harvard writes compellingly about racial issues. In his book, *Race Matters*, he writes: "The fundamental crisis in black America is twofold: too much poverty and too little self love." [p. 63]

Marian Wright Edelman, in her wonderful little book *The Measure of Our Success*, describes growing up in South Carolina in the days of segregation. Her father was a minister and she grew up in the black church which she describes lovingly as "a hub of black children's social existence and caring black adults were buffers against the segregated and hostile outside world that told us we weren't important. But our parents said it wasn't so, our teachers said it wasn't so. The message of my racially segregated childhood was clear: let no man or woman look down on you: look down on no man or woman." [p. 3]

That's why our Tutoring Program is so important. It tells youngsters that they matter, that they are important. We do not tutor in religion. It's all reading and writing and mathematics. But the program does express our central theological conviction: that God is the creator, that those children are precious children of God, and that the first commandment to which you and I are accountable is this: "You shall love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself."

What's bad about feeling good? Nothing. In fact, how else can you feel when you know that you are loved by the one who created you, that you are worth God's infinite grace and care, that – as the ancient psalmist put it – you iniquities are not tabulated: your falls from grace, your petty mistakes and monumental sins are not forever held against you because there is forgiveness and good and new beginnings.

I think the man wanted to know. He was a good man. He was a seeker. He had tried the religious formula. He had tried to be a religious person in all the prescribed ways: he had studiously kept the tradition, made the sacrifices, performed the rituals, obeyed all the rules, sung all the hymns, said the creeds, served as an officer, paid his pledge on time, and it still didn't feel right.

If that is you in some way, if in your history, your past or current experience, you've learned that you are not important, that you don't matter, that you are under constant scrutiny as to your worth and you rarely if ever measure up, if your life is in some way an effort to prove something, to demonstrate and verify your worth, if even only to yourself, hear the Good News: you are loved and valued and cared for by the one who gave you life and there is nothing that will ever separate you from that love.

It's all right to feel good about that. It's a sin not to. It misses, in some way, the whole point to hear that and continue to feel bad.

Ann Weems, a Presbyterian poet who writes beautifully about our faith and our human responses to it wrote a little book, *Family Faith Stories*. The premise of the book is that families convey to us much of who we are and what we believe. She writes personally about the way her parents gave the Christian faith to her.

> "It was a family treasure,
> that vase, that golden vase,
> the vase that had belonged to my great-grandmother,
> to my grandmother, and now to my mother...
> And the vase sat on the mantel
> out of reach of little fingers.
> However, I managed to reach it;
> I climbed to reach it; I broke it,
> the family treasure.
> Golden pieces of once a family treasure valueless
> that moments before was priceless.
> And I began to cry,
> then louder, in sobs that brought my mother running.
> I could hardly get it out:
> "I broke the vase...the treasure."
> And then my mother gave me a gift:
> A look of relief over her face and
> "Oh, I thought you'd been hurt!"
> And then she hugged to her the one
> who had just moments before broken the family treasure.
> She gave to me a gift: she made it very clear that
> I was the family treasure.
> I was what was priceless and of great value.
> She also made it very clear where her heart was." [p. 118]

I like to think that the scribe, because of his encounter with Jesus – the one who was God's Word, the one who was the Good News – I'd like to think that this conversation with Jesus made all the difference in the world: that he started to feel better, that he saw himself differently, not as a lobbyist or a man on trial for his life, but as a child of God, and that because of his new status, he began to love his neighbors with new passion and that from that day forward he did love God with all his heart and all his soul, with all his mind, and with all his strength. And I'd like to think that the same journey might begin for you and for me as well.

Amen.

* * *

O God, your love for us is beyond our understanding. And the expression of that love in Jesus Christ is, we know, the best thing that ever happened to us. Even when we do not fully understand, give us grace to live in your love and enjoy your love and extend your love to our neighbors through Jesus Christ. Amen.